

Epilogue: Learning from China

Chip Bruce

On October 29, we visited Wuxi No. 1 Middle School. Although the trip was still young, we had seen several schools, had talked with many teachers, and had shared with each other what we had learned from reading and talking. We were beginning to form impressions of Chinese education. During a meeting with the faculty of the middle school, I was asked to say something about what we were learning from our trip. I felt a little on the spot. The things I was learning were undoubtedly shaped and informed by talking with other delegates, but they surely couldn't be presented as the "official" view of our delegation.

There was no opportunity to develop a consensus, and the moment to speak arrived sooner than I was ready. Nevertheless, I think that what I said that day reflects what many of us felt at the time, and even after the completion of the trip. I discovered later that people in other delegations saw different things, and I'm sure that some of those in ours did as well. What I say below surely reflects what I value, even though it tries to be true to my experiences. Thus, it is not by any means intended as a definitive summary of our trip, but instead as some thoughts that are somehow both personal and collective at the same time, about some special aspects of Chinese education.

It seems to me that we can learn much from Chinese education. True, by U.S. standards the classes seemed inordinately large, and new technologies, materials, and facilities seemed limited, even in the key schools. Moreover, some of the new ideas in U. S. education were not evident in the classrooms we had seen. Nevertheless, we sensed that students and teachers were involved in a kind of learning that was challenging, engaging, and meaningful. It was connected in a way that many of us would like to see education in the U.S. be more connected.

When we speak of the integrated curriculum in the U. S., we often mean such things as writing in mathematics, or reading in content areas. These connections were evident in many of the schools we saw, but there were connections beyond the academic realm as well. Four areas seemed most prominent: (1) expanded language learning, (2) incorporating the moral, aesthetic, and physical dimensions of learning, (3) linking school and society, and (4) involving everyone in learning. None of these ideas are entirely new in the U. S., and not all would transfer easily from the Chinese context to ours, but they all seemed worth thinking about.

(1) Expanded language study. As in the U. S., teachers in China want language to open doors of the world for children. We saw parallels to our classes in sessions focusing on Chinese, English, and American literature. But the Chinese classes did not share our deficit of monolingualism. Because students were learning more than one language, they could engage more deeply in discussions about language and culture.

At the Wuxi middle school, to take one simple example, we heard a comparison made between Chinese languages and English. Where we would say, "I looked at the moon through a telescope," the Chinese would say, "Through a telescope I looked at the moon." Because the students could speak both English and Mandarin, they could meaningfully discuss the importance of this language difference: Does it imply a different way of thinking about the world? Through learning two, or

several, languages, comparative language study becomes possible in a way that it is not a reality for most of our students.

Language study was also expanded in the way language was used in the classroom. We saw that when students were asked to read a text aloud, that the purpose seemed not to assess their reading, but to help them extend their thinking about the meaning of the text. Students were encouraged to develop and articulate their own interpretations of what they had read, rather than to find the preexisting answer. This focus on meaning was connected to the practice of encouraging students to express their feelings as they read. This practice, reading aloud with feeling, has a special name, Lung Tsong.

(2) Integrated curriculum. The Chinese seemed to have a broad notion of the integrated curriculum. At the Wuxi middle school, we saw an American literature class in which the teacher used a short story as a way to engage students in critical thinking and problem solving. He asked one student to locate Cincinnati on a map, thus linking geography and literature. He had students discuss their ideas about the story in small groups. All these were ways to expand the possibilities for learning through literature by integrating it with other aspects of the curriculum. At the Shanghai countryside school we saw similar ideas in the integration of mathematics and reading.

But the idea of an integrated curriculum went further. Everywhere we went we saw sayings of Confucius calling for joining moral aims to intellectual aims, to work for social reform through education. He says that it is not enough to gain knowledge in isolation; learning must be tied to virtue and to contribution to society. Conversely, the individual cannot develop fully without the help of society. Thus, moral / social education was not an add-on, but an integral aspect of the whole curriculum.

In the same way, physical development seemed to be tied deeply to academics. In primary reading classes we saw students standing, turning, and moving their bodies to express or reinforce what they were reading. But this also meant that reading became a way to support physical development. Again, it seemed that these were not viewed as separate activities that might or might not be done together, but as inseparable aspects of what it means to develop fully as a human.

The aesthetic dimensions of life were connected in a similarly fundamental way to the rest of schooling. Students worked on their calligraphy, not just to write clearly or correctly, but to write beautifully. In every school we were greeted by beautiful displays of artwork and calligraphy. Even though we needed a translation of the Chinese characters, we could tell immediately that the artists had worked diligently to produce fine works of art. As we saw in the regular classes, this was not restricted to special occasions or special art classes, but was the essence of learning.

At the Jiangsu Wuxi Teacher's Professional School we saw the products of what must have been years of devotion to artistic endeavors (see the entry for October 29). Students presented their work in painting, drama, puppetry, choral singing, Western musical instruments, traditional Chinese instruments, and calligraphy. The high quality of their work reflects both individual commitment and an environment in the school and the community that values aesthetics, and sees it as inseparable from all learning. The linking of moral, physical, aesthetic, and intellectual development in the fundamental ways we saw is something worth thinking about as we reflect on education in the U. S.

(3) Linking school and society. Many of the Chinese we met had read and valued the works of John Dewey, who had expressed ideas about school and society very similar to those put forth by Confucius. Of course, Confucius lived 2500 years before Dewey. Regardless of their source, we saw these ideas manifested in tangible ways.

Several of the schools had display rooms showing the history of the school and the community, the accomplishments of teachers and students, articles and books by teachers, students, and former students, and photographs or articles about the accomplishments of former students. These rooms told us, and they told teachers, parents, and students, that scholarship was valued, even celebrated. They said that what children did in the school mattered, not only to themselves, but also to their families and their community. They also said that there was a history, one in which the individual mattered because of his or her relations with others.

Another way that the linking of school and society was manifested was through field trips. We learned that in some, if not all, middle schools, students take what amounts to a two-week field trip every semester. During this time, they may work in a field or a factory. In one case, students went to a river, where they studied the river bottom, the tributaries, and the water quality. Upon returning to the classroom, these students understood something more about the world beyond the school. As a consequence, they could relate things they read to their new and enlarged experiences in the world outside of school.

(4) Involving everyone in learning. One of the most striking things about the classrooms we saw was the almost universal appearance of students engaged in and serious about learning. On the playgrounds and in the hallways between classes the students behaved much like those in any U. S. school, but in the classroom, there was a dedication that is sometimes missing in our classrooms. Granted, we saw students in special schools who may have been on their best behavior for the foreign visitors. But the overall impression of students who care about learning is one that cannot be produced on demand.

Just as the students were involved in learning, so were the teachers. Several schools showed us articles and books by teachers. In every school there were opportunities for teachers to learn from each other. Teachers met regularly to discuss the curriculum and plans for the week. They were surprised to hear that such is not the case in every school in the U. S. Many of the teachers were engaged in studies of the learning going on in their classrooms. Throughout, there was a sense that learning, students, and teachers were valued, and correspondingly, expected to work hard.

Although they clearly did challenge themselves to work hard, the children and teachers seemed happy with what they were doing. Everywhere we saw smiling faces, and people eager to share what they had done and what they were learning. At the same time, they never adopted the expert role of knowing all the answers, but asked questions and listened, as well as talked.

Perhaps most important in terms of involvement with learning are the parents. We did not have the opportunity to visit many homes or spend much time with community life. Nevertheless, again and again we heard about the importance of parents supporting student learning. There appeared to be a vital connection between homes and schools based on mutual respect and a shared understanding that both were essential to the child's success.

The integrated view of learning that we saw contrasts with some other perceptions of Chinese education that may be equally true, for example, a vision of uniformity, with 60 students doing the same thing all the time, or a vision of rural schools, which we did not see. But it is interesting to note that many of the things teachers told us accorded with the emphasis on teaching the whole child to be a contributing member of society.

When we asked about how teachers judged the success of their approach, we heard little about formal assessment procedures. There did not seem to be the need to justify success in terms of independent, objective measures. Teachers pointed to students who had gone on to make contributions to their community. They said that their greatest satisfaction comes in the form of letters from former students. For example, one student might write, "You are a friend who has guided my life." Another said, "You are a lamp that lights the way." And perhaps the most touching, "You are a candle that burns itself so that others may see."

As I said above, these four areas of the Chinese curriculum—expanding language learning, integrating moral, aesthetic, physical and academic learning, linking school and society, and involving everyone in learning—are not unique to their schools. Nor should it be assumed that the Chinese schools provide the perfect model for this kind of integrated curriculum. As in the U. S., or for that matter, as in any country today, there are many unmet challenges regarding education in China. Still, seeing the Chinese schools, even in a way reminiscent of galloping by on horseback, may help us better understand our own schools and ourselves.

From: Raphael, T. E., & Bruce, B. C. (1994, March). *Journal of the Citizen Ambassador Program Reading Education Delegation to the People's Republic of China*. (pp. 25-29). Spokane, WA: People to People International.